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ABSTRACT

When tournament judges view a particular speaking event they are inevitably going to have different perceptions of that event. For example, typical descriptions for after dinner speaking events deal with time limits, originality, wit and creativity, and tasteful humor. Definitions of these terms vary, but efforts have been made to establish some semblance of uniformity in judging after dinner speaking events. The first aspect a judge must keep in mind is the speech content, whether it is appropriate to the audience and whether the humor employed is appropriate--language, logic, identity, or action. Also considered are the clarity of the serious point of the speech (if there is one), the use of wit, and the appropriateness of sexual innuendo or obscenity. Style is impossible to separate from content, but is also an aspect subject to judging, and includes accuracy, clarity, propriety, economy of words, and liveliness. While these items are not meant to be the final criteria from which a judge must evaluate a speech, judges can achieve a greater degree of uniformity in judging after dinner speaking with a clearer understanding of what the event should entail from the viewpoint of both the competitor and the judge. (HTH)

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JUDGING THE AFTER DINNER SPEAKING COMPETITOR: STYLE AND CONTENT

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STYLE AND CONTENT

Introduction

> Human societies treasure laughter and whatever can produce it. Without laughter everyday living becomes drab and lifeless; life would seem hardly human at all. Likewise, a sense of humor is generally considered a person's most admirable attribute.[1]

This statement by Charles R. Gruner summarizes the importance of humor to our society. Speech communication texts have emphasized humor for decades. Because of the philosophical stance that forensics should be an extension of what is taught in classrooms, After Dinner Speaking as a competitive event has emerged. According to Howe and St. Clair, After Dinner Speaking was offered at 158 tournaments during the 1979-80 year.[2] It is probably safe to generalize that After Dinner Speaking is one of the more popular events to watch and judge, particularly after the competition moves to semi-final and final rounds.

The writer has judged sufficient rounds to know that once the final results have been announced there comes the inevitable agreement, disagreement, and possible shock that "such and such" could possibly have won. On many occasions I have found myself the dissenting vote on a panel of three or five judges. What comes to my mind then is were we even judging the same event? Over the years, reflection of this kind of happening had led me to conclude that when people view a particular event they are

inevitably going to have different perceptions of that event (speech). Therein lies much of the problem of why judges vote for one individual and not another.

Efforts have been made to establish some semblance of uniformity in judging individual speaking events. Tournament directors include descriptions of what the events are to consist. Perusal of typical tournament descriptions for ADS reveals several things: (1) time limits are usually established (even though they vary from tournament to tournament; (2) the speech is to be original and not a string of one-liners; (3) wit and creativity are to be emphasized; and (4) the humor employed should be in good taste. Each of these rules seems simple enough until we try to define them. For example, what is something that is original? Does that mean that no ideas can be borrowed to enhance a point? What is good taste? If you are offended by a particular point, does that mean that I should also be offended or does my warped sense of humor reduce me to hysteria?

Without doubt, there are many answers to the questions raised and to many other issues not mentioned. The point being made is that because of individual perceptions and tastes, no two judges will ever view the same ADS, or any speech, exactly the same way. The intent here, then, is not to set up a prescriptive set of rules to be universally applied to ADS judging, but rather to share some of the things this writer looks for in judging the ADS event in forensic competition. As Shakespeare has so succinctly concluded:

> A jest's prosperity lies in the ear
> Of him that hears it, never in the tongue
> Of him that makes it . . .
>
> (<u>Love's Labour's Lost</u> (V, 2)

Content

Once a forensic student has made the decision to enter the after dinner speaking category, the next problem is to answer the questions "What do I talk about, and how do I make the point?" Discussion with the coach should help determine whether the topic seems appropriate and basically what types of humor should be employed. As judges of these events, it also behooves us to consider whether a topic seems appropriate and to attempt to identify types of humor used and why certain aspects of humor were employed in lieu of others. Surface laughs are easy to identify but perhaps there is a much deeper intent to the humor that we didn't "find particularly funny."

Time and space do not allow for the identification and explanation of all the categories of humor that exist, but it is important to establish a general framework for focus. "The difference between humor and other kinds of information is that humor establishes incongruous relationships (meaning) and presents them to us with a suddenness (timing) that leads us to laugh.[3] Berger cites several techniques of humor and categorizes them as follows: (Please note: the lists here are not complete but only representative.)[4]

Language (Verbal)	Logic (Ideational)	Identity	Action
Allusion	Absurdity	Before/After	Chase scenes
Bombast	Analogy	Caricature	Slapstick
Definition	Ignorance	Embarrassment	Speed
Exaggeration	Reversal	Impersonation	Time
Irony	Rigidity	Imitation	
Puns		Stereotyping	
Satire			

The above categories are by no means the "be all and end all" of humorous technique but rather serve as examples of the potential approaches a speaker might employ. One of the key elements to any technique or approach seems to be incongruity. ". . .The types of stimuli known as incongruities

hold one principle in common: each is an 'observable deviation from an implied standard.' This conception permits us to apply the term incongruity to appearances, actions, situations, characteristics, ideas--any thing or part of a thing, that is not conceivably, what it ought or might reasonably be expected to be . . . ."[5] It follows then, that a crucial factor in judging ADS is the ability to identify and understand the nature of the incongruities used in the speech in an attempt to determine why a particular technique was employed and how successful it was.

One of the criteria used by most judges of ADS is whether or not the "serious point of the speech is apparent and developed during the course of delivering the speech. As mentioned earlier, wit and creativity are emphasized as important features of ADS. At this point it is necessary to establish a basic difference between wit and humor and how that plays an integral part in the development of the serious point of the speech.

Gruner states that wit is made up of irony, satire and ridicule and that it springs from a serious motive.[6] According to Gruner, wit differs from humor in overall purpose and is designed to ridicule folly or show scorn for something. Humor can "just be." It is further implied that humor might be a part of wit but the humor doesn't stand by itself. It (humor) is part of the overall technique used (wit). If one accepts Gruner's premise, then the concept of the "serious" point of the ADS takes on added significance. The ADS judge, in looking for the serious point, needs to view the speech in an overall perspective in order to ascertain the creative wit employed. Was the serious point clearly stated? Did the technique used advance or clarify the underlying serious point of the speech? Gruner maintains, and

rightly so, that it is possible for the chosen technique to have a direct and adverse effect on the perceived serious point of the speech.[7] In the use of satire, for example, it is possible for the serious point to be lost because we concentrate more on the humorous exaggeration. Judges need to be aware of this possibility. If the serious point doesn't seem evident, two possibilities exist: (1) the speech doesn't contain one and should be judged accordingly; or (2) perhaps the point was missed because of our attention to the humor when, in fact, the point was there and lucidly made. A study done by Taylor tends to support the possibility of this notion.[8]

The ADS judge should never lose sight of audience reaction to the speech. It is contended here that the potential audience for the ADS competitor encompasses more than just the one or two judges in the round. Therefore, the humor employed may have a more or less universal appeal. Just because the judge doesn't think something is very funny doesn't mean it should be judged negatively. What was its (the humor) effect on the other members of the audience? Conversely, just because the judge thinks something is funny doesn't mean the rest of the audience thinks so. In other words, "response to some jokes (humor) depends upon one's familiarity with the group the joke is thrust at and one's attitudes toward such groups."[9] Depending upon circumstances, certain "in" jokes just may not work. The writer feels it is the responsibility of the individual speakers to be cognizant of such possibilities and adjust the content of their speeches to the occasion. Failure to do so should be judged negatively.

Another area of concern regarding the judging of ADS is the use of obscenity and/or sexual innuendo. These approaches are quite often used

and the judging of same becomes a very personal thing. Each of us knows what he likes/dislikes or feels is appropriate for a given time and audience. The writer is certainly no prude but has used the obscenity/sexual matter as a basis for decision several times. As in the previous point regarding audiences, the ADS judge needs to attempt to measure the impact of obscenity and sexual references on the immediate audience.

An example can best explain. I recently judged a final round of ADS at a tournament in the Midwest. One speaker was doing quite well regarding audience reaction to his speech. Suddenly, he launched into a series of very sexually suggestive remarks. The shift was so sudden that it caught the audience completely by surprise. The shift, in-and-of-itself, wasn't so bad, but the change in language and sexual suggestion was too much. Had the speaker made just one such reference he may have escaped unscathed. Such was not the case. Laughter evoked from the first utterance turned to small giggles, smiles and then embarrassed silence as the speaker continued. In my opinion, the thrust of the sexual innuendo (no pun intended) became unacceptable for that particular audience and situation. Apparently the other judges in the round felt the same way I did because that particular speaker finished with the lowest rank possible. One can only speculate as to what the judges in the preliminary rounds thought.

You may agree or disagree with my comments about judging the content of the ADS competitor. In the final analysis it becomes a personal choice based on values and knowledge of what the event should entail. It is important that we maintain as much objectivity and open-mindedness as possible. To judge humor and its impact, we must be able to perceive it

and, as Grimes has concluded, "the most important condition for the perception of humor is a state of objectivity or disinterest, a state marked by an attitude which is neither for nor against the main features of the joke, witticism, or happening."[10]

Style

Attempting to assess the style of an after dinner speech as a separate entity from content is impossible. The two are inextricably fused. For the sheer sake of organization and clarity, the impossible is attempted here. "Style may be defined as the selection and arrangement of those linguistic features which are open to choice."[11] At first glance this definition seems rather open-ended; but if we consider those aspects of occasion and audience already alluded to, the definition takes on new meaning. We are, in fact, limited in our choices of approach. These parameters are what a judge should consider in determining whether a particular style has been clear and appropriate.

"If we are right in observing that a humorous manner rises in a departure from the expected or the familiar, it follows that the most general characteristic of such a style is its use of indirection."[12] The idea here is to play with the expectation of directness but seek an unusual perspective for perceiving ordinary events, thus exaggerating some features of the event or minimizing others.[13] It is important for the ADS judge to attempt to determine the nature of the indirect device used and establish their clarity and appropriateness.

Wilson and Arnold have outlined what a good speaking style ought to possess.[14] It is imperative that the judge of individual speaking events, be

it ADS or some other event, consider the following characteristics:

(1) Accuracy: "All style has degree of accuracy; the thought is expressed with either precision or fuzziness."[15] It is essential that the ADS speaker be judged on the choice of wording he is using in an effort to bring his ideas to light for the audience. Do the images and allusions contained within the vocabulary conjure up the correct images and reactions for the topic and occasion? (2) Clarity: This characteristic obviously overlaps with accuracy. Clarity is really a matter of degree. In other words, the more vauge the idea, the more difficult it is to comprehend.[16] The prime concern in this element is the audience. All too often the speaker forgets their perspective. The speaker knows "where he is coming from" idea-wise but the audience may not. The judge has his/her own reaction to this concept but close scrutiny of the audience's nonverbal response to the speaker may give some hint of their understanding. This is not intended as a final determining factor in judgment but a point to consider.

(3) Propriety: Appropriateness of material has been discussed under the content section of this paper, so a few summary comments will suffice here. Probably the most important thing for the ADS judge to consider regarding material being used is whether or not the intent of the material is clear. Intent will strongly dictate material used to achieve that end. If the intent is evident to the judge and the audience, certain indiscretions might be overlooked. This is, of course, a personal matter for the judge but if objectivity is evident, it can be a judgmental criterion.

(4) Economy: "By economy in language we mean the right choice of words, in right amount and best order for instantaneous intelligibility."[17] Put in a

nutshell, it is possible for a speaker to say too much. Does the speaker use six puns to make a point when three puns would have been sufficient? Does the speaker begin to lose the audience in long detailed analogies which aren't necessary? As the audience's attention begins to lag so does the speaker's credibility and the judge should note this. (5) Liveliness: This characteristic (which includes delivery) is the most important of all the qualities of good oral style. Liveliness comes from animation, conflict, suspense, proximity, lively imagery and relating events in a "you are there" manner.[18] Does the speaker literally make the images come alive for the audience? The judge needs to weigh the success of the speaker in getting the audience involved in the speech. Do the nuances come through clearly? Is the "comic timing" such that it properly sets up the humor? If visual aids are employed, (a technique used more and more in recent years) do the visuals add to the clarity and meaning of the speech or are they "just there?"

"Style is a part of the art of public speaking which emerges from our choices and combinations of language."[19] It becomes the personal manner of utterance which makes the speech come alive. Style should not become an artificial decoration to be exhibited but rather a culmination of all aspects of speech preparation and delivery which make the final vehicle effective and desirable.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has been an attempt to identify and explain some of the ingredients of after dinner speaking which should be considered by the judge before rendering a decision. The items offered are not meant to be the final criteria from which that "God-like personage" (the judge)

passes judgment. In fact, the list is a personal compilation and by no means exhaustive. My prior claim that judging is a very personal thing still holds. At the bottom line, we still form our judgments based on our personal likes, dislikes and perceptions. The writer feels that, in a very basic sense, this is the way it should be. Each judge should base his/her decision on individual perceptions. It is possible, however, given the comparatively stringent and narrow guidelines of what the ADS category should consist in individual events competition, for disparities in judgment to enter the picture thus causing misunderstanding and frustration. We can achieve a greater degree of uniformity in judging after dinner speaking if we can arrive at a clearer understanding of what the event should entail from the viewpoint of both the competitor and the judge. Hopefully, this paper sets forth some insights toward that end.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Charles R. Gruner, Understanding Humor: The Workings of Wit and Humor (Chicago: 1978), p. 1.

[2]Jack Howe and Jack St. Clair, ed., Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results, Vol. XIX (Long Beach, 1980), p. 98.

[3]Arthur Asa Berger, "Anatomy of the Joke," Journal of Communication, XXVI (Summer, 1976), p. 113.

[4]Ibid., p. 114.

[5]Wilma H. Grimes, "A Theory of Humor for Public Address: The Mirth Experience," Speech Monographs, XXII (August, 1955), p. 219.

[6]Charles R. Gruner, "Is Wit to Humor What Rhetoric is to Poetic?," Central States Speech Journal, XVI (February, 1965), p. 19.

[7]Charles R. Gruner, "An Experimental Study of Satire as Persuasion," Speech Monographs, XXXII (June, 1965), p. 153.

[8]Pat M. Taylor, "An Experimental Study of Humor and Ethos," Southern Speech Communication Journal, XXXIX (Summer, 1974), pp. 365-66.

[9]Jeffrey H. Goldstein, "Laughing Matter: Theoretical Notes on Humor," Journal of Communication, XXVI (Summer, 1976), p. 106.

[10]Grimes, p. 222

[11]Joseph A. DeVito, "Style and Stylistics: An Attempt at Definition," Quarterly Journal of Speech, LIII (October, 1967), p. 249.

[12]Donald K. Smith, Man Speaking: A Rhetoric of Public Speaking (New York: 1969), p. 186.

[13]Ibid.

[14]For a complete list of characteristics on style see: John F. Wilson and Carroll C. Arnold, Public Speaking as a Liberal Art (Boston: 1968), pp. 280-92.

[15]Ibid., p. 280.

[16]Ibid., p. 282.

[17]Ibid., p. 284.

[18]Ibid., pp. 290-91.

[19]Ibid., p. 309.